

India, Indians, and Indianness in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

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Abstract

Beyond the general themes that were presupposed and hypothesized from the writers on the oriental side of the globe, Nissim Ezekiel's works celebrated the ordinariness of events with his disillusioned vision free from conventions, exaggerations, or abstract ideas. As one of the foundational figures in postcolonial India's literary history, he brought a novice Modernist standpoint for Indian poetry in English— that of balance between an existential involvement with life and an intellectual quest.

Through a literary reading of his works, we explore the motifs of India, Indians, and Indianness found in and through his unique use of the English language. Although he wrote in a postcolonial India, how far does Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'Hybridity' in a postcolonial nation work for Nissim Ezekiel? In a de-colonized India, Ezekiel is never at home. We trace his poetry to see how 'Alienation' in his country of birth makes his psyche as disillusioned as someone in exile. His works show the effect of his marginalization as a Jew, challenging the vaporized multiculturalism of India. It portrays the trauma of the minorities that do not feature in the overvalued binaries of Hindus and Muslims. Does multiculturalism operate only through power equations? Ezekiel speaks of the lives, myths, and superstitions of rural people who never accept him as their own, resulting in a cultural conflict in poems, namely— "Background Casually" and "Soap". Eventually, there are instances of resolution in "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S." and "Night of the Scorpion". Ergo, he finds a balance of expectation and acceptance in his concept of 'home'. References are made to his poems, namely— "Visitor", "Night of the Scorpion", "Enterprise", "Background Casually", "Soap", "Railway Clerk", "Professor", and "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.".

Keywords: marginalization, postcolonial, culture, hybridity, home, disillusionment

The Indian way of life provides the vision of a natural and real way of life. We veil ourselves with unnatural masks. On the face of India are the tender expressions that carry the mark of the Creator's hand. (Shaw qtd. in Srivathsashri 213)

The ship of the East India Company brought not only colonial history to India, but a culture of living, behaving, and last but not least, speaking. Before Nissim Ezekiel, no Indian poet writing in English took the risk of treating topics such as marginalization, postcolonialism, and alienation using typical Indian English in poetry. From the road of high-sounding words and phrases, metaphors from the British way of thinking and writing, expressions of Victorian English, long and complex syntax, and perfect idiomatic usage- Ezekiel made some interesting detours that gave a special Indian aura to several of his poems. Many writers wrote about India- whether the English Paul Scott or the Scottish William Dalrymple, Anglo-Indians like Ruskin Bond and Rudyard Kipling, or Indian writers like R.K Narayan and Raja Rao- but we notice that they were confined to topics related to rural India, spirituality, British colonies, poverty, Hinduism, and other religious perspectives. Although no doubt these were the topics worth mentioning in literature and integral to India, with time, Ezekiel sketched the new face of Indian English poetry, introducing us to a divergent view of India, Indians, and Indianness.

1. Nissim Ezekiel's Idea of India

In postcolonial literature, Hybridity becomes a symbol of growth, revolution, innovation, or a new life. It was traced that in the 19th century, Charles Darwin used the term for cross-fertilization in plants. Human association with Hybridity dated back to ancient Greeks, where there were relationships between a Roman man and non-Roman woman for extension of the progeny.

Colonization was the civilizing mission that was the white man's burden as claimed by writer Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballads of the East and West", which says, "East is East, West is West, and never the twain shall meet". Writings of the famous anthropologist Bonislaw Malinowski, who traveled in the 20th century to New Guinea islands to study the natives in their "original setting". These writings represent possession of a distinct culture that remains uncontaminated by any foreign influence. But can a culture be completely isolated or sealed?

Later, Homi K. Bhabha gave a significant turn to Hybridity by proposing a complex cultural hybridity concept that is central to postcolonial studies. According to Homi K. Bhabha, culture can be characterized by change, flux, transformation, and, most importantly, by mixedness or interconnectedness, which Bhabha terms as Hybridity.

So, if people were travelling to a remote place, hitherto unknown by man, this itself was colossal evidence that these places now and then were the center of their curiosity and investigation, for their means. Ergo, the denial of inherited binary rejects Indian inferiority and reveals British brutality.

In his famous book, *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashish Nandy points out that before the 1830s, most British people lived like Indians. They married Indian women and even offered puja to the Indian Gods and Goddesses. So, there is no ready-made cultural binary.

Coming to Ezekiel, a reading of his "Enterprise" can have a multi-layered analysis. On the surface

level, it is a holy journey- 'a pilgrimage', but indirectly he is hinting at something frustrating his psyche:

Exalting minds and making all,
The burden light, the second
stage; Explored but did not test the
call
The sun beat down to match our rage (It started as a pilgrimage
Ezekiel 117, Collected Poems 1952-1988)

He describes a metaphysical journey that he undertakes with some enthusiastic people. This journey is comparable to the human condition on Earth- full of difficulties and failures. Critics interpret this poem in myriad ways. Some compare this to the journey of the Magi; some say that the first stage can be compared to the early youth of man- innocent and unaware of problems and failures of adulthood- and some say that Ezekiel's irrepressible Jewish psyche is revealed not only in Biblical terminologies such as bread and wine, vision, martyrdom, saints, prophets, and the promised land but also in his genuine concern for the Jewish predicament. However, we posit that this is how Nissim Ezekiel found India and its essence.

Nissim Ezekiel was a Jew living in a Hindu-dominated India that had just become free from British rule. The history of Jews in India goes back to ancient times. Judaism was one of the first foreign religions to arrive in India in recorded history. Unlike many parts of the world, Jews lived in Ancient India without any instance of Anti-Semitism from the local majority populace. Now a better established community, they have assimilated many local traditions through cultural diffusion. Initially, their ancestors arrived in India during the time of the Kingdom of Judas. Several others identify themselves as descendants of Israel's ten lost tribes— emigrants to Israel in 1948. The Indian Jewish community further divides into Cochin Jews, Chennai Jews, Syrian Jews, Goan Jews, and Bene Jews. Bene Israel goes back to 1768 when Yechezkel Rahabi wrote to a Dutch trading partner that they were widespread in Maharashtra province and observed two Jewish observances, the scheme's recital, and observation of Shabbat rest. They claimed that their ancestors survived persecution and political turmoil and came ashore at Navagaon near Alibay, 20 miles south of Mumbai, in the 17th century. Today 70,000 Indians Jews live in Israel, and the remaining 5,000 live in Mumbai. So, these historical facts reflect how sometimes things are not as they are on paper.

In Ezekiel's poetry, too, we can trace this idea of India. After all, this is how his ancestors came to India, then divorced, and many of them returned to their 'homes'. In his poetry, he is constantly searching for a home. So, how does the notion of Hybridity impact the concept of a nation-state?

The idea of a nation is ultimately a salad bowl phenomenon in which cultural flavour is unique to the people living in the political boundaries that remain unchanged for ages and continue to remain in the future. The notion of Indianness remains unchanged from a glorious past to the future.

That is why after having so much diversity, a nation has certain common ground that can be a matter of pride and importance for each citizen of the nation. The politically defined territory is the heart of the nation.

Salman Rushdie, in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands", makes the reader believe that they must not look at themselves as grounded in any particular national culture but as displaced beings living a life of exile. Migration may happen because of war, natural calamity, political persecution, economic persecution, and so on.

In "Background Casually", Ezekiel reveals his identity struggles in India- the country of his birth and belonging- where he, as well his community, are considered alien. Beginning with his childhood in the first stanza, readers eventually learn his entire story through the course of the poem. Some doubts arise while reading his poems, namely— "Soap", "Visitor", "Night of the Scorpion", "Enterprise", and "Professor", but they are clarified in "Background Casually".

In a somewhat aggressive demeanour, he takes the name of communities of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians who were enormously more significant in number compared to the Jews, who then become "prey before wolves", these are the constant motifs and are present in almost all setting of his poems.

Through a depiction of the Roman Catholic school, he attacks Christians who constantly accuse him of the murder of Christ. In his poem 'Soap', he did not remain a child, but the unknown fear remained constant, and the question of representation seems very significant there. In this poem, even without taking the name of any community, the aura that he creates was evidence of his poetic genius.

It was a constant reminder that this 'bigger' figure was the same who haunted him in childhood.

Now the small crowd is collecting
 And the shopman is much bigger than me
 And I am not caring so much
 For small defects in well-known brand
 soap. So, I am saying
 Alright ok Alright
 ok This time I will
 take
 But not next time. (Ezekiel 269, Collected Poems)

2. Nissim Ezekiel's Idea of Indians

Another term introduced by postcolonial critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha is 'Mimicry'. It is nothing but the erroneous and comic imitation of the colonizers' mannerisms that are mocked by the former. The metonymic strategy produces the signifier of colonial mimicry as the affect of hybridity - at once a mode of both appropriation and resistance, from the disciplined to the desiring. (Bhabha 172 *The Location of Culture*)

The attempt is to stabilize the cultural flux and Hybridity that characterizes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and structure it in the binary of superiority and inferiority between Indians and British superiors, which is not a natural phenomenon as we established above.

Indeed, learned Indians could be a threat to the so-called civilizing mission of the British. Despite colonial intention, the British don't want Indians to be like them. In 1835, British politician

Thomas Macaulay gave a treatise on promoting English Language Education and European Learning and how it would benefit the British rule. In his Minutes on Education, he states that they should "create a class of person Indian in blood and colour and English in taste, moral, opinion, and intellect". Bhabha similarly defined this as "white, but not quite" (Bhabha 127). Ezekiel too admits this in his poem:

Other day I am reading newspaper (Every day I am reading Times of India
To improve my English Language) (Ezekiel qtd. in Chin hade 40)

In the poem "In India", he shows mimicry that almost turns hypocritical— how due to foreign influence, Indians imitate British customs as if anything 'Indian' is inferior. Western music playing in the background is a strong motif in this poem. He mentions the "Roman Catholic Goan boys", "whitewashed Anglo-Indian boys", "muscle bound Islamic boys", and "Anglo-Indian gentlemen", and of course, the indifferent Indian husbands and reserved Indian wives:

They copied, bullied, stole in pairs
They carved the table broke the chairs
But never missed their prayers.... Then someone says: we can't enjoy it somehow don't you think?
The atmosphere corrupt,
And look at our wooden wives, I take him out to get some air. (Raizada 139).

Yet contrary to stereotype, Ezekiel shows the willingness of the lady to talk to her English Boss. Through this, he attacks assumptions and tradition:

This, she said to
herself, As she sat at
table
With the English Boss, Is
it? This is the promise:
The long evenings
In the large apartment
With cold beer and Western Music,
Lucid talk of art and literature,
And of all "the changes India
needs", At the second meeting
In the large apartment. (Raizada 32)

Nissim enumerates various communities living in India, using irony as his tool to express the hypocrisy in their urban setting.

I ride my elephants of thoughts,

A Cezanne slung around my neck (*Quest* 40)

Despite revealing the hypocrisy, Nissim Ezekiel's concept of India is not rigid. His poetry acknowledges the shades of Indians— from the superstitious image of Indians in "Visitor" to the lady he addresses as 'sister' in "Good-Bye party to Miss Pushpa T.S.", a typical Indian way of addressing a lady. The cheerful and helpful lady shows the Indian temperament as contrasted to the stiff upper lipped superiority of the British people. Besides, Ezekiel has used the conversational style of Indians in his writing here:

I don't mean external sweetness
 But internal sweetness
 Miss Pushpa is smiling and
 smiling Even for no reason
 But simply because she is feeling. (Ezekiel 23, *Hymns in Darkness*)

As disillusioned as some of his works might be, in "Visitors", we see that he starts believing in the superstitions of the village folk and his ultimate disappointment in its failure to come through. Folktales and superstitious mythology are a part of any culture, but when it starts affecting human lives adversely, it should be questioned.

So, apart from a grudging belief in Indian folklore, writing in the typical Indian conversational tone, and being in touch with the human side of Indians, did Ezekiel's poetry depict the Indian essence, or what one may call— an 'Indianness'?

3. Nissim's Idea of Indianness

The concept of "Indianness" is the beautiful assimilation of all the fairness and follies, acceptances, and expectations from Indian culture. Nissim Ezekiel struggles with his thoughts on Indianness, as the psyche moulds itself in a dichotomic structure shown in his poems' titles. The poems "Minority Poem" and "Patriot" strengthened this view.

In his collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, renowned author Salman Rushdie suggests that even if a person is not physically displaced, all of us are displaced in time. He also says that to relieve ourselves from this state of exile, we can fashion our own cultural identity by mixing the elements of identity as a whole. The mixing of Ezekiel's thoughts like any other product of colonial and multicultural society developed a sense of 'ambivalence', a term coined by Swiss psychologist Eugene Beleur and discussed by Bhabha within the postcolonial paradigm. Bhabha describes ambivalence as the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizers and colonized. But it can be applied in multidimensional ways, and it allows the colonized to have or accept elements of both cultures (Bhabha 160).

Nissim Ezekiel's mindset never denied the concept of Indianness or its cosmopolitan values. In his poem "Patriot", he shows that he never let his bullied childhood affect his mind. Although the negative attitude of others haunted and followed him till adulthood. What we see is an essence of indecisiveness and bewilderment that takes hold of him, but never negativity, for the 'other' culture.

I am standing for peace and non-
violence. Why World is fighting fighting
Why not all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi
Ancient Indian wisdom is 100%
correct I should say even 200%
correct,
But modern generation is neglecting
Too much going for fashion and foreign things. (Ezekiel 18-19, *Classic Poetry Series*)

He also throws light on 'tolerating' each other, which means somewhere in his heart, Nihilism had taken root. But this is so human, Ezekiel never took possession of the concept of Indianness as larger than life. Other writers talked about India's spirituality, or some just discussed it as an "exotic" land. As E.M. Forster stated in *The Passage to India*, "The Ganga, though flowing from the foot of Vishnu and through Shiva's hairs, is not an ancient stream" (Forster 1). But that doesn't mean he did not feel it as any other 'patriot' may claim. A question that begs itself is that despite being born in Bombay, dying in Bombay, writing about Bombay, he felt a lack of connection with the natives, as he described in the poem, 'Minority Poem':

In my room, I talked to my invisible guest
They do not argue but waits, till I am exhausted
Then slip away with inscrutable faces (Ezekiel qtd. in Joseph 149)

Compared with the writer Rudyard Kipling, an Anglo-Indian, Ezekiel's thought of Bombay is quite diverse. It is his mother city. It would be good to remember that both writers had divergent power equations with the country:

Mother of cities to me
But I was born in her
gate
Between the palm and the sea
Where the world's end – stream waits (Kipling, *To the city of Bombay: Dedication to seven seas*).

Kipling belonged to the colonizer's community, whose dominance was over half the globe. His struggle was, by far, the search for identity. On the contrary, Nissim kept an eye not only on the positive side of India, but he also smells the 'burning of city' or the problems of his city, such as poverty and corruption. He sees Indianness as it is, in a simplistic, human, and natural way.

Ezekiel finally succeeded in his search for 'home'. He rejects the world of abstraction rather prefers the warmth of human relationships and the zest of life.

"We are born alone, we live alone, and we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we are not alone." - Orson Welles

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